

Music in Charter Schools as an Indicator of Educational Focus

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Educational policies are continuously changing at both the state and federal level. While policymakers state that the purpose behind each change is to further benefit our students, there are underlying principles behind each policy that affect our students in complex ways. Charter schools provide an interesting look into modern educational focus, as they are an innovative form of education that is heavily driven by new policy. In order to examine the focus and priorities of educational policymakers in Indiana, I examined and compared music programs in traditional public schools and charter schools.

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Along with immigration, foreign policy, and national defense, education is a subject that is hotly debated in politics at both the federal and state levels. The reason behind this is simple: quality education is seen as an essential element of a productive society, and Americans believe that providing this quality education can help our country be more competitive internationally. However, while most Americans share this belief that an excellent education is a necessity, there is a difference in opinion on what kind of education we should be providing for our students, and what that education might entail. One such opinion that can be easily seen at the national level in programs such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top is that education should be driven by competition, and that we should compare our students to students around the world through standardized test scores and other measurable means. This approach to education has led to a drive to find new, innovative, and competitive forms of education in order to provide our students with the best chance of competing internationally.

One of these new and innovative forms of education is the charter school. Commonly believed to be private institutions, charter schools are actually treated as public schools. Charter schools are fairly new, with Minnesota passing the first law allowing charter schools in 1991 (Center for Education Reform, 2015). The idea behind legislation allowing charter schools is that they allow for more independent thinking free from the restrictions that traditional public schools face. In return, charter schools are subject to higher degrees of accountability and more severe consequences for failing to meet expectations than traditional public schools. Often, when charter schools fail to meet accountability requirements, they will lose their charter. This is not a rare occurrence, Ball State revoked its sponsorship of seven charter schools in 2013 (Associated Press, 2013). Without a sponsor, a charter school also loses its charter, which results in a closure of the school. This unique combination of freedom and accountability is what causes charter

schools to be an exemplary representation of the political ideas behind modern education. By analyzing the specifics of how Indiana charter schools operate, specifically regarding music programs, we can analyze the effects of our educational priorities and how these effects impact students.

Before examining specific policies and procedures in charter schools, we must first establish the basics of how charter schools operate in the nation. Essentially, there are two different methods through which a charter school can be formed. The more common method is for an independent group to start a new charter school through an application and interview process. In Indiana, organizations seeking to form a school must apply to the Indiana Charter School Board in order to obtain a charter. The application process includes an in-depth study of the proposed charter school and an interview process where the applicants must demonstrate the sustainability of the school as well as the capabilities of the team applying for the charter. There is also a public hearing that must be held in order to allow for public commentary, as well as a substantial amount of documentation about five-year plans for the school and projected success rates for students (Indiana Charter School Board, 2016).

A second method that can be utilized to form a charter school is to take an existing traditional public school and place it under the authority of a charter organization. There have actually been several cases of a longstanding public school petitioning for independence from its school system, such as Granada Hills High School (now Granada Hills Charter High School) in California (DiMassa, 2003). When this happens, the school becomes an independent entity, accountable to the state. Additionally, a public school can be selected to become a part of a charter school network. This means that the charter school will take over management of the school, but is held accountable to the school system that the school was a part of. This happened

recently in the Indianapolis Public Schools system. Francis Scott Key 103, a school with a grade of 'F' for four years prior to the conversion, was absorbed into the Phalen Leadership Academy charter school system. Because of the nature of the conversion, the school was still kept as a part of the Indianapolis Public Schools corporation, but started to function as a charter school (Colombo, 2015).

Outside of the basic process for establishing a charter school, there is little common ground between states in how a charter school operates. There is no national governing body that oversees these schools- all of the funding, legislation, and oversight happens at a state level. Because of this, when discussing charter schools, one must look at a specific state such as Indiana. Charter schools have been growing in Indiana since 2002, when the first school of this type in the state opened. (Indiana Charter School Board, 2016a). In Indiana's legislation on charter schools, the stated purpose is to serve different learning styles of students, offer students innovative choices, provide opportunities for educators, allow public schools more freedom in exchange for accountability, and to provide parents, community members, and students with greater opportunity for involvement in the school system (Ind. Code § 20-24-2-1).

As previously stated, the reason that we are examining music in charter schools is to obtain information about priorities in education. Charter schools are a fantastic resource to use for this because of the novel and unconventional nature of the system. By analyzing a modern form of education and how it impacts students and various programs, we can start to understand what the priorities of our educational system are. However, because charter schools are so new, it is impossible to analyze and understand the educational impacts of the schools without taking into account basics such as funding, administration, teacher qualifications, and accountability systems.

In Indiana charter schools, funding is simple on the surface. According to the state, funding is administered on a per-pupil basis. The average daily membership (ADM) count of the schools is recorded, and the school is given a set amount of money per pupil that is enrolled in the school. This amount changes from year to year. For instance, for the fiscal year 2016 the amount per pupil was \$4,967. For the fiscal year 2017, the amount will increase to \$5,088. In order to provide an accurate representation of the school's attendance, the count to determine the ADM happens four times a year. If the ADM changes, the amount of funding that the charter school receives will change to reflect that. This money, referred to as the Basic Grant for Charter Schools, makes up the majority of what charter schools receive (Indiana Charter School Board, 2016b). However, there are many more sources of revenue for charter schools beyond the Basic Grant.

Going beyond the Basic Grant, there are essentially two different types of revenue sources for charter schools in Indiana. There are programs that are available to both public schools and charter schools, such as the Non-English Speaking Program Grant and the Indiana Secured School Fund. There are also programs that are available exclusively to charter schools, such as the Public Charter Schools Program Grant (Indiana Charter School Board, 2016b).

Another important aspect of charter school operation to take into consideration is the system of accountability that charter schools answer to. The foundation for this accountability is the A-F system that Indiana uses to grade all of its schools, both public institutions as well as accredited private schools. This system, put into place by Public Law 221, uses a combination of ISTEP+ performance and Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act to give schools a ranking of Exemplary Progress, Commendable Progress, Academic Progress, Academic Watch, and Academic Probation. Each category on the scale corresponds to a letter

from A-F. The chart below provides a depiction of how the ISTEP+ passing scores are used for this calculation. In order to receive a rating, a school must have a certain amount of students passing the ISTEP+, as well as an improvement over passing rates over three years. For instance, if a school only had 50 % of students passing the ISTEP+, it could still receive an Exemplary Progress rating if the average passing rate had improved by 5 % over the past three years.

PERFORMANCE (% passing ISTEP+)	IMPROVEMENT (Average passing percentage improvement over three years)				
	Exemplary Progress	Commendable Progress	Academic Progress	Academic Watch (Priority)	Academic Probation (High Priority)
≥ 90%					
≥ 80%	≥ 1%	< 1%			
≥ 70%	≥ 3%	≥ 2%	≥ 1%	< 1%	
≥ 60%	≥ 4%	≥ 3%	≥ 2%	< 2%	
≥ 50%	≥ 5%	≥ 4%	≥ 3%	< 3%	< 0%
≥ 40%	≥ 6%	≥ 5%	≥ 4%	≥ 1%	< 1%
< 40%		≥ 6%	≥ 5%	≥ 3%	< 3%

(Indiana Department of Education, 2009)

The Adequate Yearly Progress stipulation from No Child Left Behind factors in that if a school does not meet Adequate Yearly Progress, the school can not proceed beyond the Academic Progress category, equivalent to a grade of C, regardless of ISTEP+ performance. Adequate Yearly Progress is a calculated based on attendance, graduation rates, as well as English and Math performance for subgroups based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Indiana Department of Education, 2008).

Of course, the above system of accountability also applies to traditional public schools. However, due to the nature of the charter program, charter schools are subject to far more levels of oversight from the state government. The system for this accountability depends on the level of charter school. For instance, a charter school serving primary grades must achieve certain standards on the IREAD Assessment in Grade 3, whereas high schools must meet requirements

for graduation and college or career readiness (Indiana Charter School Board, 2012). The various systems and tests used for accountability are numerous and complex, but the response is very simple to understand: if a charter school fails to meet the requirements of their overseeing authority, then the charter school loses its charter (Indiana Charter School Board, 2012).

The important takeaway from this analysis of charter school operation is the focus around holding schools liable. Being able to survive as a charter school in Indiana requires a school to be subject to this accountability. All of the other aspects of charter schools revolve around this. For instance, the freedoms to be independent from a school district or to have different licensing requirements for teaching staff are all contingent on charter schools meeting certain numbers. This alone says a great deal about the focus of educational policy in Indiana. This focus on accountability means that the driving force behind charter schools, a new and innovative form of education, is a series of tests and numbers. However, in order to have a complete understanding of how this focus on accountability impacts charter school operation, we must look at specific programs in charter schools, and some of the key differences in how charter schools operate compared to public schools.

Specifically, we will be looking into music programs in charter schools. Utilizing music programs as an indicator of educational focus provides several benefits. One of the primary benefits of using music is that school music programs have a high visibility. Generally schools are proud of the successes of their music programs, and advertise what their music programs have done. This facilitates finding information about music programs. Another reason to use music in research like this is that music programs provide unique benefits to students. These benefits are hard to quantify, and can not be represented with standardized testing like what is used to hold charter schools accountable. However, although it is challenging to measure how

music can impact a student's academic success, many colleges and hiring boards recognize the fact that music can be an important factor in student development. In an article by Arthur Sandeen, some of these factors are highlighted. Music, arts, and other nonacademic disciplines are all discussed in the article as being essential to students' well-being (2003). While this article is focused at university level issues and the specific realm of student affairs departments, the message is relatable to all levels of schooling: there is more to an education than measurable values. Music programs offer an experience beyond measurable values, which is why the treatment of music programs in schools can assist us in determining what priorities these schools have regarding education.

In order to compare charter school music programs with traditional public school music programs, I performed a study of 8 charter schools and 8 traditional public schools in Indiana using the Indiana Department of Education's Compass database. This database contains records on demographic information, student enrollment, standardized test scores, faculty rosters, and other aspects of school operation. Because the most recent teacher rosters available were from the 2013-2014 school year, all of the statistics are based off of this year. The results of the study can be found in Table 1. Due to music programs being more developed at the high school level than at earlier grade levels, I only researched charter schools that had included grades 9-12 as part of its enrollment. In the interest of comparison, each charter school is listed next to a traditional public high school from the same area. The charter schools are in bold while the traditional public high schools are in regular font. For areas that had multiple schools in a township, I selected the high school that was closest geographically to the location of the charter school. Basic demographic statistics, such as student enrollment and the percentage of students who are in the free or reduced lunch program are included in order to provide an idea of the

economic situation in each school. I also looked at the amount of music teachers on each school's roster, and whether or not they were specialized music teachers. What this data value is representing is the teaching load of the music teachers included on each school's roster. A specialized music teacher is one who teaches only music or music-related classes. A teacher that teaches music appreciation, while also teaching visual art, science, and mathematics, will count as a music teacher, but not as a specialist.

The schools selected for the study are meant to provide a representation of the different geographic areas of Indiana. 21st Century Charter School and West Side Leadership Academy are both located in Gary, and represent the Northwest region of Indiana. Smith Academy for Excellence and South Side High School are in Fort Wayne and represent the Northeast region. Anderson Preparatory Academy, Anderson High School, Options Charter School, and Carmel High School represent Central Indiana towns. Hoosier Academy, Lawrence Central, Damar Charter Academy, and Decatur High School are in Indianapolis, which has the greatest concentration of charter schools in the State. Community Montessori and New Albany Senior High School represent the South part of Indiana, while Signature School and Francis Joseph Reitz High School represent Southeastern Indiana (Indiana Department of Education, 2016b).

In interpretation of this data, the determination of whether or not the music teachers in each school are specialized is the most important factor. After examining some charter schools and public schools, a trend in the setup of music programs is becoming obvious. Each traditional public school that was examined had specialized teachers, and almost every school had specialized music teachers on the roster. One exception is Decatur Central High School. However, it should be noted that Decatur Central had 3 specialized music teachers, and there was one general studies teacher that also taught music appreciation, which is the reason that not all

music teachers were noted as being specialized. While the music program setup of each traditional public school was generally the same, there was a lot of variance in how charter schools approached music programs. Out of the 8 charter schools examined, 2 did not even have music teachers. Out of the 6 schools that did have music teachers, only 3 of the schools had specialized teachers in these positions. This lack of specialized music is important, because one of the unique benefits of music is that a comprehensive music program can offer a wide variety of opportunities for students to take advantage of. A comprehensive music program consists of at least a choir department and a band program, with some schools also supporting an orchestra department. This setup offers three different types of ensembles for a student to choose from, based on their interest in music and affinity for different musical instruments. Going further, most band programs at the high school level offer several different ensembles for students to participate in outside of the core concert ensemble, such as a marching band, pep band, and jazz band. Choirs generally offer both concert and show choir, and schools that put on musicals offer a pit orchestra for students to participate in. This type of setup in a school provides many different avenues for musical engagement for students. Without specialized educators in each position, the benefits of having a comprehensive music program are lost.

What does this mean in terms of educational focus? As mentioned earlier, charter schools were formed as an innovation aimed at improving the status of education. However, when looking at the status of music teachers in charter schools, it becomes obvious that having a high quality and comprehensive music program is not a priority for schools. This relates back to the accountability issues addressed earlier in the paper. Having students participate in music does not necessarily increase test scores. However, the existence of a charter school depends on meeting certain standards regarding standardized tests and academic improvement. If the driving force

behind charter schools is test based accountability, this shows us that that is where the focus of educational policy in Indiana lies. It is not in educating the whole student: providing students with a complete set of tools and resources to develop. Rather, the purpose behind education is to achieve higher numbers on standardized tests. The affect of this is that programs aimed at going beyond these shallow measurements, such as music programs, are not seen as a priority in our educational systems.

The purpose behind this analysis was not to determine whether or not charter schools benefit students. Due to the unique status of these schools and the short time span that most charter schools have operated in, it is difficult to truly understand how they affect student academic outcomes. However, it is because of this diversity and the timeline of operation that charters make an excellent tool for examining our system of education and determining what the focus of this system is. And, based on the high-stakes accountability and lack of specialized music instruction in charter schools, it is readily apparent that the focus of our educational system is on measurements, not necessarily educating the whole student.

School (2013-2014)	Student Population	Student % Free or Reduced Lunch	Faculty Population	Number of Music Teachers	Specialist Music Teachers?
21st Century Charter School	632	84.2	34	1	Y
West Side Leadership Academy	1075	63.2	67	1	Y
Smith Academy for Excellence	85	84.7	9	0	N/A
South Side High School	1400	79.9	78	2	Y
Anderson Preparatory Academy	906	53.2	74	3	Y
Anderson High School	1854	69.4	145	3	Y
Options Charter School	170	34.7	10	1	N
Carmel High School	4774	10.4	298	10	Y
Hoosier Academy – Indianapolis	456	23.0	50	0	N/A
Lawrence Central High School	2279	56.7	163	4	Y
Community Montessori	526	37.3	28	13	N
New Albany Senior High School	1996	57.6	110	3	Y
Damar Charter Academy	160	81.9	11	1	N
Decatur Central High School	1783	59.8	104	4	Y/N
Signature School	328	9.8	29	1	Y
Francis Joseph Reitz High School	1312	39.9	135	2	Y

Table 1
Results from 2013-2014 School Year

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